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SUBJECT: POPE SHENOUDA III ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, RELATIONS WITH U.S.

REF: A. CAIRO 2292
1B. CAIRO 1695
1C. CAIRO 1427
1D. CAIRO 1420
1E. 2006 CAIRO 4243

Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The Ambassador raised religious freedom issues with the Coptic Orthodox Pope, Shenouda III, on July 26. In an extended and unusually substantive response, Shenouda addressed his concerns about some "critical" matters, including controversies over conversion as well as what he alleged was the GOE's inability to contain extremist Islamist ideology. The Pope also expressed his willingness to work with the Library of Congress (LOC) to preserve rare recordings of Coptic Orthodox hymns. The Pope, whose kidney problems led to a hastily-planned trip to the Cleveland Clinic in early July, appeared vigorous, but also noted that he plans to return to the U.S. for several weeks in August, both for additional treatment and an active pastoral program in several cities. He was warmly nostalgic about his contacts with U.S. presidents in the past. End summary.

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by LOC Director, LES political specialist, and poloff (notetaker), called on the Pope at the Abbassiya Cathedral on July 26. The 83 year-old Pope, who appeared vigorous despite recent ill-health, was in an expansive mood, and offered his candid views on current issues of religious freedom in Egypt. The Ambassador noted the Pope's publicized recent letter to Mubarak as a significant statement on behalf of religious freedom, and asked whether he could comment on any response from Mubarak. The Ambassador asked the Pope's advice as to how best the USG could support the cause of religious freedom in Egypt. The Pope prefaced his response by noting that the GOE is extremely sensitive to the appearance of "foreign interference" in Egypt's religious and sectarian issues. He further opined that "many people abuse freedom, especially in the newspapers." He declined to respond directly on the subject of his letter to Mubarak.

Conversion

13. (C) The Pope said that conversion, especially away from Islam, remains a divisive and potentially incendiary topic.

The Pope did not mention the recent controversy (ref A) regarding a Muslim-born woman in Alexandria who reportedly converted to Christianity, but noted that the traditional Islamic view, that apostasy should be punished by death, is at odds with the Quranic injunction that "There is no compulsion in religion," and with the guarantees of freedom of religion in the Egyptian constitution.

¶4. (C) The Pope noted that he had been particularly concerned by an April 24 court ruling (ref C), against the right of Christian-born citizens who had converted to Islam to recover their original Christian identities. He expressed relief that the Supreme Administrative Court had decided on July 2 that it would re-examine the Administrative Court ruling on re-conversion to Christianity, and he said that he is hopeful that the converts will receive a favorable ruling in September.

¶5. (C) Note: The Pope, who has customarily demonstrated strong public support for President Mubarak--for example, the Pope endorsed Mubarak in the last presidential election in 2005 and instructed the Coptic Orthodox faithful to vote for Mubarak--surprised many when he addressed a public letter of complaint to Mubarak in May. In the letter, which was published in Al-Keraza, the official church magazine several days after the Bamha sectarian violence (Ref D), the Pope asked Mubarak to "end injustice imposed on the Copts and to "activate" constitutional provisions that ensure equal rights for all Egyptians regardless of religion. The Pope blamed the security services for not taking sufficient measures against those who perpetrated violence against Egypt's Christian minority, and he called upon Mubarak to review the April court verdicts (Ref C) which forbid Christian-born converts to Islam from re-converting to Christianity. The

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GOE has not responded publicly to Shenouda's letter. Many observers see the letter as evidence of Shenouda's growing frustration with the GOE's perceived failure to address sectarian tensions. End note.

Islam and Tolerance

¶6. (C) The Pope said that he thinks the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Sayid Mohamed Tantawi, and Minister of Islamic Endowments, Hamdy Zaqqouk, are "moderate and noble" men, but that Egypt's Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, by contrast, is "so different." The Pope expressed concern at Gomaa's penchant for stirring up controversy and for focusing attention on petty or even bizarre issues. He said that the Mufti's fatwa on the sanctity of the Prophet Mohamed's urine (ref B) was not the first time the Mufti had embraced a controversial position. For example, the Mufti had reportedly ruled that if a fly landed on a Muslim's food, it was permissible to consume the food so long as both wings of the insect had touched the food. According to Shenouda, the Mufti based this ruling on a prophetic tradition that said that each fly has both a pure wing and a polluted wing. Shenouda said that the Mufti's July 22 interview with Newsweek on the permissibility of apostasy within Islam had been disingenuous, because of his caveats about the grave nature of the sin of apostasy as well as the need to contain any possibility of social strife.

¶7. (C) Shenouda lamented the GOE's failure to tackle the Islamist agenda at the level of ideas and religion. While the GOE's fear of the Muslim Brotherhood leads them to try to control the MB in the political arena, the GOE appears reluctant to challenge the MB ideology at a religious level. For example, the Pope said that the GOE addressed recent incidents of Muslim attacks on Christians (ref D) by brokering "meaningless conciliation" sessions, rather than by trying to prosecute those (Muslims) accused of fomenting and conducting the violence. Both Egypt's Christians and the West, said Shenouda, are threatened by the ideology of "an

"aggressive minority" within Islam whose socio-political-religious outlook justifies violence in the name of the faith. Despite many Quranic passages which call for peace and tolerance, said Shenouda, there are also many key passages which can be used to promote intolerance and hatred. The Ambassador and the Pope agreed that we must carefully press for and support intra-Muslim dialogues so that moderates might prevail.

¶8. (C) Shenouda also noted that USG policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Israel-Palestine bear some responsibility for current tensions. "Fanatics think President Bush opposes Islam because he opposes terror," said Shenouda. If the USG can resolve these three divisive issues, the Pope continued, you will remove these issues as potential sources of continuing controversy. Shenouda warmly recalled his meetings in the White House with Presidents Carter and George H.W. Bush, and commended their efforts on behalf of Middle East peace. (Note: The Pope did not directly ask to meet President Bush during his upcoming visit to Cleveland, Jersey City, and Boston, but his statement of fond recollections for his previous contacts with U.S. presidents implied he would welcome such an opportunity.)

LOC Issues

¶9. (SBU) The Ambassador also took advantage of the meeting with the Pope to introduce Cairo's new Egyptian-American LOC Director, Dr. Fawzi Tadros. We conveyed the request of Librarian of Congress Billington for Shenouda's assistance to facilitate LOC-Coptic Orthodox Church cooperation to preserve rare recordings of Coptic hymns and other sacred documents. The Pope expressed his willingness to work with LOC.

The Pope's Health

¶10. (C) The Pope, who will turn 84 on August 3, has long suffered from chronic kidney disease and other age-related ailments. Thoughts of his eventual passing and the related succession process are often on the minds of observers here (ref E). In late June, a turn for the worse prompted an emergency trip to Cleveland. The treatment seems to have succeeded. Upon his return to Cairo airport, the Pope noted

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that he felt much improved, but that he was too old for a needed kidney transplant. One of the Pope's senior Bishops (protect) told us that the Pope continues to feel unwell and that he needs "special treatment" which can only be provided by the Cleveland Clinic. Despite these health concerns, the Pope appeared vigorous, mentally sharp, and even witty in his meeting with us. He noted that in addition to his planned medical treatment, during his visit he will also tend to the affairs of the Coptic Orthodox community in the United States. The Pope noted with pride that at the beginning of his tenure, in 1971, the United States had just two Coptic Orthodox churches. Today there are "170... though some of those are priests without churches, or churches without priests."

RICCIARDONE